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Peter McPhee, *Revolution and Environment in Southern France: Peasants, Lords, and Murder in the Corbières 1780-1830*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. xi + 272 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-19-820717-4.

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The Corbières, a remote region in southwestern France located between Carcassonne, Narbonne, Perpignan, and Quillan, has consistently been and continues to be one of France's least populated -- and least studied -- regions. In the eighteenth century, the Corbières housed wool and tanning industries and an agricultural sector that included sheep and goats, grain, and some vineyards. By the early nineteenth century, the region's rocky hillsides were largely denuded of their oak and other trees, which in turn caused erosion and flooding in the valleys as the soil and stones formerly on the mountains blocked rivers and streams. At the heart of these changes was the deforestation of *garrigues*, pastures and forests that had been used as common lands, despite their technically belonging to local *seigneurs*, many of whom were absentee landlords. The herds of sheep and goats dwindled as their food sources disappeared, and the result was a turn to mono-agriculture with a focus on wine production over all other crops. Peter McPhee's study of the Corbières during and after the Revolution explores the causes of this environmental transformation, and in the process provides a rich analysis of political, economic, and social trends in the region. He also links these trends to an infamous event: the murder of two local nobles by disgruntled villagers in August 1830.

McPhee, who has published numerous works on peasants and on southwestern France, argues that the environmental catastrophe of the Corbières can only be understood by placing it within the long-term context he provides. While many have blamed Revolutionary changes in landholdings for peasants' ability to strip the region of its trees, McPhee makes the case that the transformation was well on its way before 1789. A severe crisis hit the region's textile industry in the 1780s as Carcassonne lost its once prominent role in international markets for cloth, particularly in the Middle East. Further, McPhee draws attention to what he describes as a "perceptible shift" among local lords who began "treating seigneuries and land as purely an economic resource" (p. 34) in response to their own financial difficulties. Land clearance resulted from both of these trends, whose effects were felt during the pre-revolutionary decades. The confusion regarding property ownership in the aftermath of 1789 permitted peasants, driven by misery, to cut down trees and pull out their roots so as to sell the bark to tanneries and to use the rest as firewood. Once the mountains lost their growth, peasants had no option but to focus on wine production. Finally, the arrival of the railroads in the 1850s made viticulture the most lucrative sector of the economy.

In the process of laying out the social, economic, and political context of these transformations, McPhee presents a meticulously researched and engaging history of the region over five decades. The introduction does a tremendous job of drawing the reader into the study as it describes with tantalizingly little detail the 1830 murder of two local nobles in one of the villages of the Corbières, Villeseque. McPhee uses his story of environmental degradation, along with the local reverberations of

the political upheavals since 1789, to foreshadow this gruesome murder, which is examined fully in the final chapter of the book.

The characters in McPhee's study include local authorities, nobles, and peasants, as well as the environment itself. The first chapter describes "*cette miserable contrée*" in the 1780s, exploring the already visible degradation of the *garrigues* and tensions over land use. In the following three chapters, McPhee explores the region's political and social trends during the Revolution. Each of these chapters covers a brief period: 1789-1790, 1790-1792, and 1793-1795. They thus give a detailed look at how the region experienced the Revolution, which the peasants generally viewed positively. The inhabitants of the Corbières demonstrated their devotion to the Revolution by providing larger numbers of conscripts than required, for example. Throughout McPhee does an admirable job incorporating the peasants' perspective on land use and showing how their views often contradicted those expressed in the National Assembly. He also emphasizes the ways in which national legislation, local authorities, and peasants all contributed to the transformation of the environment, while efforts to stop the process were always too little, too late. The following three chapters provide a longer-term view on these issues, demonstrating their continued relevance through 1830. In a chapter on the "war on the cleavers" from 1800-1830, for example, McPhee devotes significant attention to the Napoleonic prefect, Charles-Joseph Trouve, an interesting character in his own right. Despite his good intentions and constant efforts to implement legislation meant to limit deforestation, Trouve was unable to reverse a trend which he believed was ruining the region economically.

While providing a fascinating narrative and many entertaining and at times astounding anecdotes, McPhee's study makes several important historiographical and methodological contributions. First, his research on the region disproves the thesis that only vestiges of feudalism existed by 1789. Feudalism was alive and well in the Corbières in the 1780s; the Revolution intensified and permitted expression of a long-felt sense of injustice among the peasantry. Second, McPhee's work on rural responses to the Revolution, on peasants' roles in local politics during and after the Revolution, and on economic transformations and debates about the Revolution's effects on emerging capitalism all represent significant contributions to issues of current debate. In a chapter on the transformation of the rural economy from 1789 to 1830, McPhee makes use of extensive quantitative research on landholding patterns in the region to disprove the argument that the wealthy most benefited from the end of "feudalism." In the Corbières, peasants, not large landholders, were most motivated to put an end to communal landholding. Referring to this process as the "'peasant route' to capitalism" (p. 199), McPhee argues that "it was smallholders who were the motive force of the Revolution and those who were in the forefront of significant economic change" (p. 238). His findings thus demonstrate weaknesses in both Marxist and revisionist interpretations of the Revolution and its effects in rural settings.

McPhee also makes an important point about the long-term political and environmental effects of Revolution, which would be felt in the region for many years. For example, he notes that the 1821 birth and baptism of the duke de Bordeaux was largely ignored in the communes of the Corbières: "Twenty-five years of Revolution and Empire had wrought a fundamental change in popular assumptions about social authority" (p. 168). Claiming that "the full consequences of the Revolution took decades to be resolved" (p. 240), McPhee demonstrates the longevity of Revolutionary issues in his exploration of the causes of the brutal murder. By 1830 when the murders took place, "Villeseque was a village where land hunger was a constant, nagging imperative, irritated by the constant reminder of two large estates with their absentee but intrusive proprietors. For forty years the peasants of Villeseque ... had continued to insist that the consequences of a revolution they had made and defended included the control and exploitation of their immediate environment" (p.229). McPhee's long-term approach allows him to trace the roots of this event, which revolved around issues of land use and social authority that had remained unresolved since 1789.

In his analysis of the killings themselves, McPhee presents three interpretations of the murder and its form, which included mutilation of the bodies. First is the social reading, namely that demographic and economic realities explain the peasants' anger. Second is the cultural reading, where, as in historian Alain Corbin's study of an 1870 murder in the Dordogne, *Village of Cannibals*, peasant mentalities explain the violence. Third is the political explanation, and this is the one that McPhee puts the most weight behind even though he argues that none of the three excludes the others. Here McPhee interprets the murder of the Letreilles as the Villesequois version of the July 1830 Revolution in Paris. Villagers' shouts of "*Vive la liberté*" and "*Vive l'empereur*" during the confrontation give added weight to this interpretation. For Corbin, the peasantry's constant exposure to violence and the butchering of animals permitted them to view their repeated blows to a noble's body as less than shocking. McPhee, however, sees "such possibilities – for which it must be said, there is no direct evidence – [as] complementary rather than alternatives to a political reading of the mutilation" (p. 218). McPhee's analysis of the murder in the Corbières thus provides an alternative reading of peasants' sense of politics and their relationship to national issues.

This is an excellent local study whose depth of research and broad implications make it an important contribution to the historiography of the French Revolution. But it is also much more than that. The book contributes to debates within rural history, environmental history, social history, and economic history. In addition, this multifaceted account is accessible and engagingly written thanks to the rich details McPhee incorporates to illustrate his argument. My only criticism is that the maps at the beginning of the book could have been more usefully designed. An additional map should have been included to permit the reader to situate the Corbières within southwestern France. The two maps which do appear, one of the communes of the Corbières and the other showing the region's physical characteristics, include few of the same towns and are difficult to make overlap. Aside from this minor flaw, the book is a model of thorough research, good writing, and balanced argumentation.

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